Strategies for States to Improve Safety Net Program Access and Efficiency
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HOW WE IDENTIFIED THESE STRATEGIES
This fact sheet summarizes findings from the Urban Institute’s evaluation of the Work Support Strategies (WSS) initiative.

This multiyear, multistate initiative—funded by the Ford Foundation and other foundations—aimed to help families with low incomes get and keep the work supports for which they are eligible.

Through grants and expert technical assistance, WSS supported six states from 2011 to 2016 in their efforts to reform and align the systems delivering work support programs that improve families’ well-being and stability.

WSS focused on three primary supports: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Medicaid and the Children’s Health Insurance Program, and child care assistance through the Child Care and Development Fund.

Millions of working parents qualify for food, medical, and child care assistance that can help them support their families. When parents receive these crucial supports, they are better able to stabilize their lives, advance their careers, and raise their children. But many eligible families do not receive the help they need, partly because of barriers in cumbersome state safety net benefit systems.

Amid a recent renewed federal focus on improving the customer experience for safety net programs, advancing equity by expanding access to these supports, and reducing programs’ administrative burden on states, we have pulled out lessons from our previous research on how states can streamline these processes.

We found that when states make interrelated changes to their technology systems, policies, and business processes—and when they prioritize the customer’s point of view—they can provide faster and more efficient service, improve access to benefits, and ensure families receive the supports they need.

IMPLEMENT NEW OR UPDATED TECHNOLOGIES
Technology improvements allow states to automate some administrative tasks and improve efficiency by giving frontline workers more time to support customers, ensuring consistency in determinations, and reducing errors.

- Create new eligibility systems or improve existing systems, and build integration into systems to help people apply for multiple benefits through a single process.
- Develop online applications or web portals through which applicants can be prescreened for eligibility, apply for benefits, find information on their benefit status, report status changes, and submit documents.
- Implement lobby management technology to maximize efficiency and minimize wait times by providing information about queues to staff managers and customers.
- Consider electronic data verification, which speeds up application and renewal processes, and document imaging systems, which facilitate paperless processes and file sharing across programs and locations.
STREAMLINE POLICIES
By simplifying policies and removing unnecessary program requirements, states can improve outcomes for program staff and customers.

- **Make operations more efficient** by reducing the use of face-to-face interviews, simplifying eligibility and verification requirements, and lengthening certification periods.
- **Save time for customers and caseworkers** by exploring whether existing state program application requirements ask for more documentation than is mandated by federal law.
- **Align policies across programs** to reduce administrative burdens on families eligible for more than one program.

IMPROVE BUSINESS PROCESSES
Exploring ways to make business processes more efficient and integrated can benefit both program staff and customers.

- **Update business methods** for greeting customers, accepting applications, making eligibility determinations, and processing changes and renewals.
- **Consider ways to streamline operations**, such as changing the layout of lobbies in local offices, reallocating tasks among staff members, and eliminating unnecessary steps.
- **Integrate business processes across programs**, such as by integrating intake for customers seeking assistance through multiple programs and having workers who can process applications for multiple programs.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO MAKE MEANINGFUL CHANGES TO PROGRAM ACCESS AND INTEGRATION?
States face numerous challenges to making meaningful and lasting improvements in social services delivery, but previous efforts show that large-scale, long-term change is possible when states have the following assets:

- **Leadership and vision.** Active leadership from high-level agency officials involves not only practical leadership, but also each leader’s personal passion for implementing a shared vision and commitment to continuous improvement.

- **Stakeholder cooperation and change in agency culture.** To overhaul policies, technologies, and processes, state leaders need buy-in and cooperation from many government and community partners, including frontline staff.

- **Strategy to realize the vision.** To establish a deliberate strategy, states need to develop purposeful structures and methods to manage the implementation of their reform strategies and ensure ongoing alignment with their vision.

- **Capacity to use data for planning and accountability.** States need to have the human and technological capacity to collect, analyze, and use data to assist in developing policy and business process changes.

To learn more about these findings and recommendations, see our full evaluation of the Work Support Strategies initiative at https://urbn.is/worksupportstrategies, and see the summary brief on our evaluation findings at http://urbn.is/2vLAIFK.